

## Political Inclusion of Seasonal Migrant Workers in India:

### Perceptions, Realities and Challenges<sup>1</sup>

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Do seasonal migrants in India vote? If not, how do they ensure that they remain politically relevant in the villages they leave behind? In cities, where they spend a large part of their working life, what are the ways in which they get their voices heard? This study looks at the participation of migrant workers in political processes – both through the institutionalized electoral process and through other lesser-known avenues of asserting political agency. Done in a multi-location format it covers respondents from 15 locations spread across five states of India – Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra

**Keywords:** migrant workers, political inclusion, internal migration in India

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#### 1. Background

*In the usually bustling street on Santacruz west, Mumbai there is a sudden wave of hyperactivity. A number of hawkers start rolling up their plastic sheets, pack up and run to find a safe abode for their merchandise. I turn back to find a municipality van approaching slowly. As the van turns left, within 5-10 minutes, business is as usual – close to 700 hawkers selling vegetables, fruits and everyday utility items on a street not longer than 200 meters. What makes this group of hawkers unique is that they are all migrants to the city, coming from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Orissa, the key labor exporting states of India. Some of them have been in Mumbai for more than 25-30 years but remain foreigners to the city, struggling for an identity and basic citizenship rights. Their average day is defined by a struggle to protect their livelihood from the state; who in this case is represented by the civic authority, the Brihan Mumbai Municipal Corporation [BMC]. Most lack access to basic amenities – water, sanitation and shelter; they sleep on the pavements and are frequently crushed to death by callous, drunken drivers. While they struggle to claim a ‘human’ existence in cities, their families lose out on access to basic entitlements and government subsidies in the villages. This group constitutes the large floating population of the rapidly growing economy of India. Despite contributing heavily to its growth as cheap labor working in the construction, mining, and services sector it gets compromised; rather too often. They have limited voice and no constituency. Quite often, they fail to vote and participate in the electoral processes because of their high mobility.*

The quantum of internal movement in India is large. While the official estimates provided by Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI) suggest a number of 30 million per year (NSS 64<sup>th</sup> round), sector wise employment estimates show that more than 100 million people move every year from rural areas in search of livelihood (Deshingkar & Akhter, 2009). Quite often these migrant

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<sup>1</sup> The study was carried out in partnership by 5 NGOs – Aajeevika Bureau, Udaipur, Grameen Development Services (GDS), Lucknow, Grameen Evam Samajik Vikas Sansthan (GSVS), Ajmer, Disha, Nasik, and Ghoghardiha Prakhand Swarajya Vikas Sangh, Madhubani. The financial support for the study was provided by Sir Dorabji Tata Trust and Sir Ratan Tata Trust.

workers are away from home at the time of elections. The current voting regulation does not allow them to send their votes through postal ballots.<sup>2</sup> Working in the informal unorganized sector of the Indian economy and earning meager wages, migrants find it difficult to make a trip home only to cast their votes. In cities where they go to work, they lack voting rights. Betwixt and between, migrants miss out on participating in the only institutional mechanism in the country, the elections, to raise their political views/concerns. They also fail to carry with them the basic entitlements guaranteed by the state such as access to low cost food, health, subsidized education and shelter.

The question of political inclusion of migrant workers has received significant attention in case of international migration. It has also taken various forms such as cross-cultural integration debates (Rex and Singh, 2003), discussion on granting voting and citizenship rights to migrants (Tarumoto, 2003) and debates on the merits of extra-territorial voting (Collyer & Vathi, 2007). It is rare that the topic is discussed for people moving within the boundaries of a nation-state, save a few exceptions such as the literature on internal migrants in Mexico by Cornelius (1974) and Abbas (2010). This study aims to raise this question in the context of India, where internal migrants face the problem of political exclusion within their country.

## 2. Key Research Questions and Methodology

What shape does the question of political inclusion take in a country such as India – where, people are not able to vote because of their mobility, and are denied their citizenship rights and entitlements? Learning from the field and the literature, *Political inclusion* for the study was defined as the right and ability to vote freely, the right to access basic public services and the right to have one's concerns reflected in local/state/central level policy documents. Conceptually, the inquiry was divided into three parts – one aiming at understanding migrants' actual voting behavior, the other two focused on understanding the level of political activism at the source and at the destination<sup>3</sup>. The key questions of the study were –

- Are seasonal migrant able to vote?
- Where do they feature in the three-tier democratic system?
- Who are the key stakeholders in ensuring their political inclusion? and,

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<sup>2</sup> The regulations of the Indian Election commission do not seem to pay much heed to the rising incidence of internal mobility in the country. There is a system of postal ballots, wherein citizens can send their votes by post. However, this facility is not available to all citizens. The Conduct of Election Rules, 1961 says that *postal ballots can be exercised by service personnel, people under preventive detention, migrants from Jammu & Kashmir and Bru and Reang tribal migrants from Mizoram and Tripura*. In addition to above, staff deputed on election duty outside the place where they are registered as voters, offices of the President. Vice-president, governors and state ministers can also make use of postal ballots, if required (Ministry of Law and Justice, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to state that the study operates with the premise that the ability to exercise voting rights is a prerequisite and essential to accessing basic citizenship rights. Rather than testing a hypothesis, the investigation focuses on characterization of political participation of migrant workers.

-In the cities, how do migrants assert their political agency in the absence of voting rights?

The study was carried out in 15 locations spanning 5 states – UP, Bihar, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Gujarat (refer Fig 1). The data collection method was primary, using tools such as questionnaires, FGDs and case study collection. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the multi-location data collection exercise was complemented with an in-depth case study in Mumbai. The total sample size for the study was 686<sup>4</sup>.

The average age of the respondents was 33 years, most of who belonged to SC/ST (47%) and OBC (31%) categories and had completed education up till the primary or secondary level; 30 percent were illiterate. A significant number (68 per cent)

owned land; however, their key source of livelihood was income from migration. Most of our respondents were male [93 per cent]. The predominant nature of migration observed within the group was individual male migration for a period of 7 months a year, on an average. In most cases, we observed inter-state movement save a few cases such as those of Nasik, Masooda, and Nandurbar, where people found employment within their home state. The largest numbers were employed within the construction sector and most migrants worked as unskilled labor (52%). The average income from migration was reported around Rs. 4000 per month and the average duration for which migrants were working at their current destination was 10 years.

### 3. Do seasonal migrants vote?

The first question that the study looked at was whether migrants were counted as voters. In India, every voter is issued a voter ID, which has a unique number and it certifies the person's right to vote. In absence of a voter ID or name in the voter list, a person is not eligible to vote. The study found that 78 per cent of the respondents reported to possess voter IDs or have their names in the voter list<sup>5</sup>. Of greater significance was the fact that close to 60 per cent of respondents had missed voting in elections

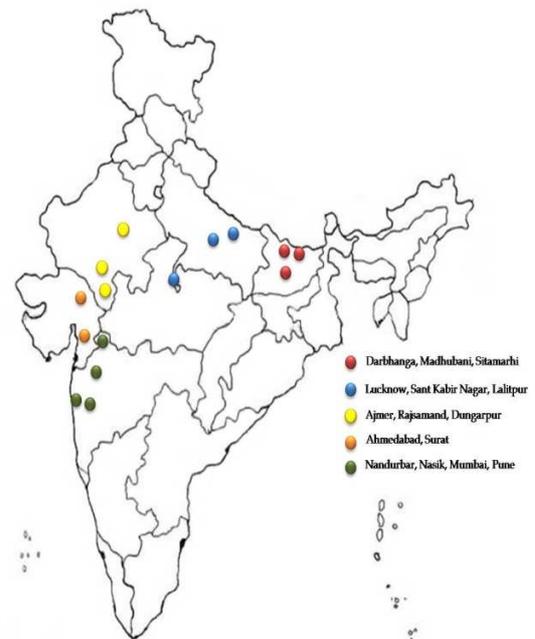


Figure 1: Locations covered in the Study

<sup>4</sup> The study focused on first generation migrants. An age bar of 21 was put for a migrant to be considered a respondent. In India, people get the right to vote after the 18 and the study required the respondents to have some voting experience.

<sup>5</sup> This figure is for the long distance migrants. We have made such a distinction as some of the questions of political inclusion do not remain as acute in case of short distance movement, where people either fall within the boundaries of their state and/or can easily come back during elections. For the overall sample, voter ID ownership stood at 82 per cent.

at least once because they were away from home seeking livelihood options. When adjusted for short distance movement, where it was easier for migrants to come home during elections, the percentage of migrants missing voting rose to 83 per cent.<sup>6</sup>

Migrants were also asked to recall the number of times they had voted. The average for this came to 5 times. There was a highly significant correlation between age of the respondents and number of times voted, with a correlation coefficient of 0.63 ( $p < 0.01$ ). 18 per cent of the respondents reported to have never voted in their life-time. It is notable that many migrants leave their home at an age as early as 13-14. The voter ID is issued at an age of 18 or more. When they become eligible to get a voter ID, their work life is at its peak and their trips to home short in duration. Many migrants reported to not have the time to get their voter IDs made. Some said to have their names in the voter list but did not have a proof by way of an ID card.

#### **4. India's three tier democratic system – where does migrant's vote feature?**

Data gathered on the question, “Did you vote in the last election?” revealed that 65 per cent of the respondents had voted in the last Panchayat elections. Compared to this, participation in Lok Sabha elections was 48 per cent (the national average voter turnout for general elections in 2009 was 59.7 per cent). There was a significant drop in participation rates from Panchayat to Lok Sabha elections. We find that as one moves from Panchayat to Vidhan Sabha to Lok Sabha elections, the participation rate comes down by 10.5 per cent at each step. The difference became more pronounced, rising to 14 per cent, when short distance movements were taken off the sample (Figure 2). In case of long distance movement, participation in election ranges from 59 per cent in case of Panchayat election to 31 per cent in Lok Sabha elections.

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<sup>6</sup> While asking this question, care was taken to clarify that the query related to their absence for livelihood reasons. However, it is unlikely that the rest 17 per cent never missed voting because of migration. At some locations, such as Mumbai, all migrants interviewed said that they had missed voting once or more. There may be issues with the way the question was asked to the respondent.

**Table 1: Migrant Workers' Participation in Elections <sup>7</sup>**

Location	Voted in Last Elections			Returning to vote	Source-Destination Distance (Km)
	Panchayat	Vidhan Sabha	Lok Sabha		
Madhubani	51	35	24	25	1200-1500
Pune	36	7	19	25	1200-1500
Surat	49	47	22	39	500-550
Nanddest	70	73	70	40	1000-1200
Darbhanga	54	50	41	41	1200-1500
Sitamarhi	60	58	44	43	1200-1500
S K Nagar	70	42	40	44	1200-1500
Nasik	55	66	61	45	1000-1200
Lucknow	69	38	32	46	300-500
Mumbai	50	28	7	50	1200-1500
Nandurbar	89	93	78	63	300-500
Ahmedabad	41	29	19	67	300-500
Kelwara	66	69	50	69	400-500
Lalitpur	100	100	95	76	200-300
Aspur	84	46	20	76	200-300
Masooda	96	90	82	94	200-300
<b>Average</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>-</b>

*Source:* Primary survey, 2010-11, Figures in percentages

As part of the study, we asked the migrants if they had ever taken a special trip home to cast their votes during elections. 54 per cent respondents said to have returned to their native villages with the specific purpose of voting during election time. Table 1 provides a break-up across locations on percentage respondents returning home during elections. Higher incidence of return is for short distance movements where it was relatively convenient to return, both in terms of time and money. Of the ones returning home to vote, 74 per cent returned specifically for Panchayat elections, again highlighting the importance attributed to Panchayat elections.

The most commonly cited reason for higher participation in Panchayat elections was social pressure, where a close relative or member from the same community was contesting the elections and participation of the migrant was sought as a duty towards his brethren. Further, since Panchayat election was a close fight in numbers, and people often won or lost by a small margin, it was important for the candidates to reach out to as many persons as possible. The size of migrant streams in these areas was

<sup>7</sup> In some locations, there isn't much difference between the Panchayat, Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha elections. It is mostly in case of short distance movements. There are also some extreme values such as close to cent per cent participation in Panchayat elections in case of Lalitpur and Masooda. A cross-check was done to ascertain if there were problems in data collection. It was found that in both cases the destination was quite near and the candidates were quite active in seeking migrant votes. Nevertheless, one does not completely rule out problems in data collection such as biased sample selection, which might very much be there.

too significant to ignore. Thus, in case of Panchayat elections, candidates were found to be actively seeking migrant votes and pursuing migrants, not only through their families at source but also at the destination. Reaching out to migrants in cities and funding their return was found to be a significant trend, particularly in case of short distance movements. Close to 50 per cent of the respondents said that their return during elections was funded by the candidates. Migrants were also promised kickbacks as liquor and cash. During our fieldwork in Rajasthan, UP and Maharashtra, we came across elaborate systems where migrant workers were brought home in jeeps and buses at the time of elections. When speaking to some migrants from UP in Mumbai, they revealed that many received return train tickets, while some were brought home in a *Marshall*, a road journey that took 3 days.

## 5. Political Participation at Source

An important question in the study was how migrants ensured that they are politically relevant in the villages they leave behind and if they lose out on entitlements because of their long absences<sup>8</sup>. When asked in an FGD, if their long absence from home and the inability to vote was of concern to them, one of the migrants said – “*Chinta ka Vishay to hai bin, Zinda Aadmi ko maar daalte hain*” (It is indeed a reason for concern, they declare us dead by scratching our names off the voter lists). Such instances were frequently reported in informal discussions, on how preparation of voter lists was ridden with politics, where people were selectively chosen, or their names struck off, without explanation. Some migrants, when asked why they returned home to vote said that it was a give-and-take relationship. In return of their vote they received access to government schemes. Some also expressed anxiety that if they did not return to vote, the schemes they were eligible for would go to someone else.

We asked a few questions related to migrant’s interface with the state and its agents in the villages at source. A particularly revealing observation was that 89 per cent of respondents remembered the name of their Sarpanch; this was true even for people who had been away from their village for more than 25-30 years. A good number reported to have approached the village Sarpanch for some issue or the other (Table 2); in comparison, the incidence of approaching any government officer was lower. The issues for which migrants reported to have approached the Sarpanch/ward member were ration cards, IAY, NREGS payment, drinking water, BPL cards, and land titles/disputes. A small number from Bihar reported to have approached the Sarpanch for voter ID or inclusion of their name in the voter list. During a discussion with a Sarpanch in Bihar, we discovered that migrants frequently approached them for a letter certifying their identity.

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<sup>8</sup> One interesting case from Darbhanga, Bihar, revealed how in areas with high male migration, election results were determined by non-migrant female voters. In one village Bela Navada from Ranipur, one of the polling booths with a voting population of 871 voters, only 250-300 had voted in the last Vidhan Sabha elections while the rest were away at work. This one-third voting population comprised of women primarily.

**Table 2: Interface with Elected Leaders and Government Officials**

	Yes, once	At several Occasions	Family members did	Yes	No
Ever approached Sarpanch/ward member	15	22	5	43	57
Ever approached a Government Officer	10	16	4	31	69
Ever approached a Corporator at destination	-	-	-	13	87
Ever approached a Govt. Officer at destination	-	-	-	10	90

*Source:* Primary Survey, 2010-11, Figures in Percentages

During the study, we came across sporadic instances where migrants played a crucial role in the determination of election results in the villages. In Mumbai, a group of migrant hawkers from UP narrated how they had once grouped against a Rajput candidate during Panchayat elections. Migrants had supported one candidate from a backward community and helped him win by returning home to vote in the elections in large numbers. In another context in Bihar, the resentment that PRI members held for migrants was telling. During a discussion with PRI members, a Sarpanch from Darbhanga pointed out “this group is a nuisance, all are absent at the time of voting but are the first ones to ask questions... their names should be taken off the voter list.”

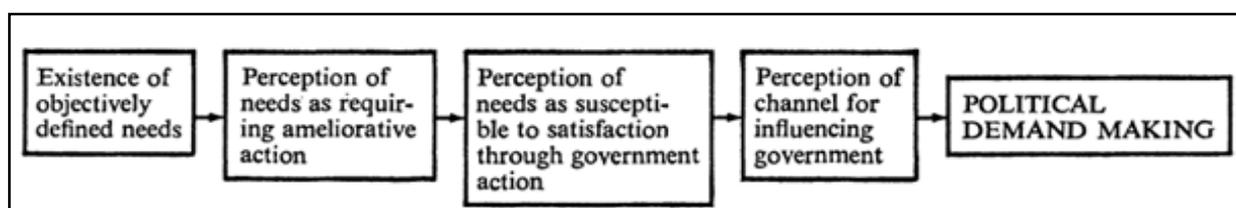
It was visible that migrants were relatively aware and also active in getting their problems resolved by reaching out to the state at their home locations. In contrast, knowledge about the polity at the destination, and instances of reaching out to them was much less (Table 2), an issue that we would delve on in the next section.

## 6. Asserting political agency in the absence of voting rights

*“Because migrants are only entitled to vote in their home location, and not the location of migration, their political agency is limited and their concerns are rarely raised effectively at their destination.”* Bird and Deshingkar (2009, p. 5)

Conventional wisdom suggests that migrants have limited political agency at the destination because they do not have voting rights. Some scholars such as Cornelius (1974), however, propose that migrants do assert their political agency, if not through voting then through ‘political demand making’. In his study of internal migrants to Mexico city, Cornelius (1974) makes a differentiation between electoral participation which is a system through which citizens aim to influence resource allocation “by replacing or retaining the incumbent authorities” and political demand making which is defined as “individual or collective activities aimed at extracting certain types of benefits from the political system by influencing the decisions of incumbent government officials” (ibid, p. 1125). However, not all objectively felt needs get translated into political demands (ibid). A number of preconditions need to be fulfilled and stages crossed before a need becomes a political demand (Figure 3). It is important for the migrant workers to first perceive that their needs were “susceptible to satisfaction by government action” and then accordingly pick the channel that would help them obtain the desired outcome.

**Figure 2: Stages in Process of Political Demand Creation**



Source: Cornelius, 1974, p. 1128

This study made an attempt to identify the various avenues available to migrants in cities to raise their concerns and get their voices heard. It looked at how frequently they sought resolution to their problems and what was the preferred medium, if they chose to make demands on the city and the state.

Migrants were asked to enumerate three problems that concerned them the most in the cities and pick one out of the three which was most hurting. The most common problems referred to were harassment by police officials, harassment by municipality staff (in case of hawkers/vendors) and irregularity of employment. Some also cited problems of shelter and water. Most migrants did not access the government health facility as it cost them the day's wages. In most cases they turned to quacks for a quick relief. Few had access to bank accounts both in the city and at the source and a fewer number had access to the public distribution system.

**Table 3: Access to State Services**

	Access to PDS	Access to Bank Accounts		Use of State Health Services
		Either in City or Village	Both in city and village	
Ahmedabad	8	50	4	15
Aspur	6	76	8	36
Darbhangra	15	55	6	32
Kelwara	2	67	17	32
Lalitpur	0	68	0	46
Lucknow	6	49	2	40
Madhubani	6	30	0	31
Masooda	18	76	4	46
Mumbai	18	62	7	43
Nandurbar (dest)	17	59	7	57
Nandurbar	4	33	7	74
Nasik	22	51	2	79
Pune	8	46	0	23
S K Nagar	7	56	5	24
Sitamarhi	4	41	4	35
Surat	2	61	4	13
<b>Overall Average</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>39</b>

Source: Primary Survey, 2010-11, Figures in percentages

They were also asked if they had taken any steps for their resolution. There weren't many instances where people had attempted a resolution of their problems, either individually or as a collective (refer Table 2). Contrary to the source region, where migrants remembered the name of their Sarpanch and reached out to him/her with specific concerns, in the cities, only 18 per cent of the migrants knew who the local Corporator (representative of the local self governance body) was. Fewer workers had approached the Corporator. Wherever migrant workers approached the Corporator, the concerns were related to work place issues, shelter and water primarily. The instance of reaching out to government officials was lesser, at 11 per cent.

10 per cent of the respondents reported to possess voter IDs at the destination while 8 per cent had voted at the destination. In most cases these voter IDs were enabled with the help of local leaders who were running for elections and wanted their voter base increased. There were several anecdotes on the opportunistic political inclusion efforts on how political parties carried out special drives for increasing their membership and migrants served as an easy target for the same. There were also stories on political parties offering voter IDs to Bangladeshi immigrants to increase their voter base.

**Table 4: Issues for which migrants approach local Politicians**

Migrants Approached the Corporator for...		During discussions with migrants at the work place, they shared that their main concern was to earn as much money as possible and send it home; after a long day of hard manual labor they hardly had any energy left to worry about local politics - “14-14 ghante ki mashakkat ke baad kiske shareer mein itni jaan barchi hai ki ghar aur pani ki samasya ko lekar corporator ke paas jaaye...hum yehan do roti kamaane aaye hain, rajniti karne nabin” (None of us have any energy left in our bodies after 14 hours of hard labor, we have come here to earn subsistence for our families, not to do politics).
Shelter	20	
Electricity	12	
Water	15	
Education	3	
Work Place Issues	30	
Physical/Verbal Abuse	5	
Theft	3	
Others	12	

Source: Primary Survey, 2010-11, n = 151, figures in per cent

It was important to understand, to whom migrants reached out in case of an emergency. Harris (2005) in his study of the urban poor in Delhi and the instance of problem solving within that community says that poor in the slums did not exhibit much initiative to solve their problems. The ones, who did, reached out to their political representatives more than any other group. There were hardly any civil society representatives or labor unions in the frame and the poor trusted the local politicians for resolution of their problems. In this study, when asked who they reached out to in case of need or an emergency, most migrants cited the names of their contractor or their employer. It was through this group that the migrants negotiated with the state and its agents. There is one interesting case that deserves a mention –

*In Santacruz east, we came across an interesting case of Rambabu that deserves a mention here. Rambabu is a 70 plus migrant from UP who enjoys great repute within the local migrant hawker community. He hosted information on arrival*

*or municipality vans and often informed hawkers in advance to take necessary safeguard. He also served as the channel through which bribes were routed to government officers. If a certain hawker was held by the municipality he helped them negotiate and strike a deal. The amount of influence Rambabu wielded in the community was remarkable. One day we came across one instance where goods of one new migrant from UP, Laxman got burnt because of a spark from a government construction site. Laxman's goods were lying below the skywalk, where the welding activity was being carried out. Rambabu, who was the gatekeeper for this group made a strong case in front of the municipality commissioner and got a reimbursement of Rs. 3000." It would not have been possible in absence of Rambabu who often acted as a liaisoning agent and problem solver for the migrant community in the area.*

Compared to the place of origin, where migrants show a reasonable degree of political awareness and participation, the engagement with political processes at the destination was significantly low. In the cities, migrants were mostly found to be resigned to fate, not seeing much merit in engaging with the state. Initiatives to solve problems, individually or as a collective, were few to come by. These were the only two instances of collectivization that we came across during the study. This small group which said to have shown some pro-activeness in addressing their own problems was concentrated in Maharashtra – one was a collective in Santacruz (east) and one union in Nashik. The formation of one collective was triggered by a threat to their livelihood, while the other was triggered by threat to shelter. In general, migrants were found to have negligible interface with politicians or civic authorities in cities; if there was an interface it was a forced interface, when their right to livelihood was threatened.

## **7. Conclusion**

The study shows that a large number of migrants are unable to participate in the electoral process, both at the source, and at the destination. In Panchayat elections, which are often a closer fight in numbers, there are special efforts by candidates, to bring home migrants at the time of elections; more if it's a case of short distance movement. However, these are all instances of opportunistic political inclusion, where migrants are seen as a ready-to-tap vote bank. Such inclusion does not give them any political voice or reach to policy. During the study one hardly came across instances of migrants' concerns being raised by political candidates. Though migrants exhibited a relatively greater political agency at the source, the expression was related to addressing day to day concerns such as installation of hand pumps, access to Indira Awas, NREGS etc. and not for broader issues such as fairness in the process of disbursing state subsidies, creating transparent public information systems so that their families have a better access to schemes etc.

At the destination, where migrants live under sub-human conditions, one again did not see any initiatives for problem resolution. The few instances of collectivisation that came up were mostly related to livelihood, either to demand better wages or to protect ones livelihood. It is noteworthy that wherever migrants have mobilized themselves, it has been on the issue of livelihood, suggesting that the engagement of migrants is predominantly economic and that is how the city and the migrant both visualize it.

There is an inherent dichotomy between pursuing one's livelihood and exercising one's voting franchise. In the workshop held to present this study, the keynote speaker Dr. Jagdeep Chhokar pointed out

“Being a registered voter, by definition, implies stability, whereas migration or “being a migrant” implies mobility. There is a dichotomy between “stability” for voting and “mobility” for livelihood and the choice between voting and livelihood is obvious. The question, however, is whether people have to necessarily opt between the two? And, if a solution can be worked out which would enable political inclusion of migrant workers?

Sainath (2005) was the first to bring the issue of political exclusion of seasonal migrant workers in India to public notice. He suggested that election timings be made in sync with migration cycles. With the variety in migration cycles, this doesn't sound like a realistic proposition. It would require reflection on what the possible strategies could be – Can it be resolved through a better voting infrastructure? Can the system of postal ballots be extended to the migrant community? Given the large numbers (~ 100 million voters), it would require a very high level of scrutiny and also demand a large resource provisioning. Creating electoral and political literacy and awareness among migrant communities would also have to be undertaken alongside.

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